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Reagan Aide Says Contras Can Fell Sandinistas

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 8 — The Reagan Administration's top official on Latin American affairs predicted today that if Congress keeps supplying military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, the Soviet-backed Sandinista Government "will not survive."

The official, Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, in effect ruled out the possibility of serious peace negotiations in Central America until the Nicaraguan rebels, known as contras, are able to put significant military pressure on the Government in Managua.

His call for increased military activity and his prediction about the ultimate overthrow of the Sandinistas if they do not yield to American demands for "democratization" of their Government were issued as the Pentagon announced plans for the largest show of American military power in waters off Central America. The battleship Iowa, accompanied by the guided-missile cruiser Yorktown and the destroyer Deyo, will conduct operations off the region's eastern coast, the Pentagon said.

Overseer of Policy on Contras

Mr. Abrams is the official in charge of overseeing the policies under which the Central Intelligence Agency distributes support to the contras. His comments were a further signal that the Reagan Administration intends to make an all-out effort to press Congress for continued military support for the contras, even though some in Congress have said the cause has been set back by recent disclosures about diversions to the contras of payments from Iran.

This week, bills were introduced in Congress to block the last $40 million appropriation from the $100 million approved last year for the Nicaraguan rebels. Some top officials have said they view the expected battle over funding for the contras as one of the major foreign policy priorities for the Administration.

Some senior State Department officials who lack Mr. Abrams's enthusiasm for the cause of the contras have expressed concern that the Administration is becoming so tightly locked into an anti-Sandinista policy that if the contras falter on the battlefield, pressure may build up within the Administration to commit American forces on their behalf.

Meeting in Miami

On Monday, Mr. Abrams and other officials met in Miami with the Costa Rican Foreign Minister to discuss a new peace plan that State Department officials said the Nicaraguan Government was sure to reject because it would compel the Sandinista rulers to institute Western-style democratic reforms.

Today Mr. Abrams said in a televised news conference with correspondents in European countries, "If you believe in negotiations, if you want the Contadora process to proceed, and succeed, we believe that the only way to do it is through the military pressure that the contras can put on the Sandinista regime."

"That's the next step," he said. His reference to the Contadora process was to the efforts of a group of Latin American nations to negotiate a peace treaty for Central America.

"What is needed is a process of negotiation," Mr. Abrams said, "and that can be achieved only, only through pressure on the Sandinistas. If there's no pressure, they're not going to negotiate, they're not going to compromise."

'Sandinistas Will Not Survive'

Mr. Abrams said that while no one can know the future, "I would say that if this current U.S. policy is maintained, it seems to me the Sandinistas will not survive."

"Either they will be forced to compromise, or refusing to compromise, the Nicaraguan people will rise up and get rid of them, just as the Nicaraguan people got rid of the dictatorship which preceded them, the Somoza dictatorship," he said.

This is the fourth consecutive year in which the Iowa has sailed in Central American waters. This year it will carry Pioneer drone aircraft, which can carry sensors, radars and television cameras and can send back reconnaissance information or fire direction data.

For the last year, the Reagan Administration has stressed the importance of providing the contras with military equipment to put pressure on the Nicaraguan Government. But the Administration's stated goal has gradually shifted from that of insuring the security of Nicaragua's neighbors, such as Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica, to that of forcing internal changes in Nicaragua.

Controversy Over a Letter

During the last year there has been a major dispute over what would happen to the contras if the Sandinistas agreed to the American demands. Last April, Philip C. Habib, the special United States envoy for Central American negotiations, wrote a letter to some members of the House, promising that the United States would cut off all support to the rebels as soon as the Sandinistas signed a peace treaty.

That led several conservatives, including Representative Jack F. Kemp, a New York Republican, to demand Mr. Habib's dismissal on the grounds that he was willing to "sell out" the contras.

The conservatives said the letter left open the possibility that the Sandinistas would repudiate the accord once the contras were cut off from funds.

Mr. Abrams, who had approved Mr. Habib's letter, said last May that he wished he could have rewritten the letter to make it clear that funds to the contras would not be cut off until an agreement was carried out.

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